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The Presbytery of Dayton

AN HISTORICAL ADDRESS

BY

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Stated Clerk

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"And upon this rock I will build my Church."
—Matt. 16 : 18.

The Presbytery of Dayton

MR. MODERATOR AND FRIENDS: It is difficult to find assured sources of human history. Records even where they exist are incomplete, and tradition imparts but an uncertain light. The annals of Presbyterianism in the territory covered by our theme are no exception.

Soon after the advent of the Pilgrim Fathers, we find people of our faith in scattered sections from New England to the Carolinas.

Strangely enough, however, when viewed from the present standpoint, its first definitely organized life appears on the sandy peninsula of Maryland, between the Chesapeake and the Atlantic, known as the Eastern Shore, and in a colony governed by the Roman Catholics.

Philadelphia and Newcastle were the chief ports of entry to the Scotch-Irish immigration, which was fundamental to Presbyterianism in America. So it was that Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland found in them a strong element. From these colonies, two streams went out, one of them through southern Pennsylvania to the West, the other through the Shenandoah Valley into Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

It was chiefly from the latter migration that the territory of which we speak was peopled, and to which we owe our beginning as a church, though later and further North in our State comes the former current which we have indicated.

After the war of the Revolution a new impulse was given to this rising tide, when in the year 1783 Virginia and states with minor claims, ceded to the general government lands lying North and West of the Ohio river, a territory out of

which have since been formed several of the most prosperous states of the Union, including the state of Ohio. In 1787 Congress passed an ordinance for the government of this new domain, and speedily an energetic population turned its face in this direction, a goodly portion of whom were of the Presbyterian faith.

From this movement of history, largely from regions South of the Potomac, the Presbyterianism of southwestern Ohio, had its origin.

The Presbytery of Transylvania in Kentucky was our fostering mother, though back of her were the Presbyteries of Lexington and Hanover in the State of Virginia.

Our immediate lineage however, is to be traced to the Presbytery of Washington, formed by the Synod of Kentucky, in the year 1799 and embracing the region on both sides of the Ohio river central to Cincinnati.

The Presbytery took its name from a small town in Kentucky, five miles back of Maysville, the home of the distinguished Marshall family of the state, who were staunch Presbyterians. The time of church organization had not yet fully arrived in this region, but the Presbytery of Washington found a virgin soil for mission work on the north side of the Ohio river.

This Presbytery did not leave much recorded history. Indeed it was a time of schism, when the Cumberland church left us, and when the New Lights and Shakers, strange to say, drew many from our fold. And yet the Presbytery of Washington attracted to its membership a group of ministers who left indelible marks in their pioneer work.

To this period, also, is to be traced some of the churches which are still in active service. First of all, perhaps, comes the church at Cincinnati, organized in the year 1790. Another church in this list, is Red Oak in Brown County, which Gillette says is one of the first, if not the very first Presbyterian Church, to be organized North of the Ohio River.

The Presbytery of Transylvania sent supplies to the congregation at Hamilton, as early as 1799. Its present house of worship stands within the grounds of the old fort used as a protection against the Indians. One of its earliest ministers, Matthew G. Wallace, distinguished himself by leading a band of settlers in relief of a company of beleaguered soldiers.

Here, too, comes the church at Dayton, organized in 1799, in the upper story of a block-house which stood where the soldiers' monument now stands, the pioneer church of the city, embracing many of its most prominent families. Dick Creek church now also of our Presbytery, under the name of Blue Ball, was established not later than 1800, and is still one of our strong country churches.

In the year 1802, the Presbytery of Washington had five pastors and thirty-two congregations. William Speer was at Chillicothe, John P. Campbell at Flemingsburg, Kentucky, John Dunlavy, at Red Oak, Richard McNemar at Cabin Creek, Kentucky, and Matthew G. Wallace at Cincinnati.

But it is now time to note the organization of the Presbytery of Miami, with which we are more directly concerned. It was erected in the year 1810, by the action of the Synod of Kentucky, setting apart to it the western portion of the Presbytery of Washington, in general terms embracing the Miami Valley. At this time it included six ministers and twenty congregations. Rev. James Welsh was settled in Dayton, Matthew G. Wallace at Hamilton, Sevenmile and Dick Creek; Daniel Hayden, at Hopewell and Duck Creek; John Thompson, at Springfield and Unity; Joshua L. Wilson, at Cincinnati; and William Robinson without charge. Bath, Lebanon, Yellow Springs, Honeycreek, Mackacheek, Washington, Troy, New Lexington, New Jersey, Brookville and White Water were vacant.. *This was the Presbytery of Miami in 1810.*

In looking over the list of ministers who labored in the field already covered by our sketch, two facts in special are impressed. The first one has already been alluded to, that

is, they were generally speaking, of southern origin, coming through the gateway of Kentucky. The second fact is, that they were for the most part of anti-slavery sentiment, and chose their change of habitation because this northwest territory was forbidden ground to enforced human servitude.

Two or three examples impress these convictions though others could be given. The pioneer among them was James Kemper. Born in Fauquier County, Virginia, it is related that over the door of the cabin in which he was reared, rudely carved on a board by knife or chisel, were the words, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Here was a good starting point for missionary work, on the frontier. When licensed by the old Presbytery of Transylvania Mr. Kemper continued his studies under Rev. David Rice, who had recently organized the first church at Cincinnati, October 16, 1790.

In the year 1792 we find Mr. Kemper accepting a call to the same church and so he became, as it is thought, the first minister of any denomination to settle in the territory described. He attained a wide and lasting influence in our region, and it has been said of him, "Few men have exerted so large an influence for good over so large a section of country," as he.

It was Mr. Kemper as a very young minister who induced the discouraged settlers at Cincinnati to stand their ground against the assaults of hostile Indians, rather than return to their former homes across the Ohio River. Another remarkable fact of his life was, that he became the father of fifteen children, ten sons and five daughters, all of whom attained families of their own. Further, it was his deep interest in the founding of Lane Seminary, which prompted two of his sons to give the sixty acres of land upon which the institution is established.

Another of our gospel heroes of these early days was James Gilliland, of Red Oak. A member of the Presbytery of South Carolina, his anti-slavery views brought forth the in-

junction that he be silent upon the subject in his pulpit. As a result he withdrew from his Presbytery, removed to Brown County, Ohio, Presbytery of Washington, where as a pastor for forty years he was honored and beloved as one of the ablest preachers of his day. In the long ago, interspersed with fugitive slave incidents, my own father prepared for a useful ministry under the private tuition of Mr. Gilliland. *Peace to his ashes.*

One more case must suffice. Joshua L. Wilson, was born in Bedford County, Virginia, 1774. He was brought up at the trade of a blacksmith, without education, beyond that received from his mother. He was converted after a removal to Kentucky and studied for the ministry and was licensed in 1802. In 1808 he became pastor of the first church, Cincinnati, where he remained thirty-eight years. A man of unbending integrity, he was at the head of social, moral and intellectual enterprises of the day in his adopted city, distinguished in the Presbyterian denomination. To-day he would be called *a fundamentalist of the fundamentalists.*

By appointment of the Synod of Kentucky, Dr. Wilson opened the first meeting of the Presbytery of Miami, 1810, by a sermon from the text, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promises as some men count slackness, but is long suffering to usward not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance,"—*II Peter, third chapter, ninth verse,* to which passage he gave a strongly Calvinistic interpretation.

After such encomiums it is far from gratifying to read that an action of Presbytery was necessary to settle personal differences between two of our shining lights, namely, James Kemper and Joshua L. Wilson. They were counseled, "To exercise forbearance toward each other and manifest to the world, that they were governed by the blessed principles of the Gospel." Only an early illustration of the truth "That we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us." We owe it, in

passing, to record that these persons were loyal to the decision of their brethren.

The first meeting of the Presbytery of Miami was held at Duck Creek, now Pleasant Ridge, November 16, 1810. Its only recorded benevolences at that time were funds for the payment of the expenses of its own commissioners to the General Assembly.

Indeed at the organization of the Northwest territory, 1787, the total benevolences of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. were $852.00. They had few or none of the organized methods of work now in vogue, but their missionary spirit in helping their weak churches and planting new ones, puts us to shame. Pastors were here subject to the order of Presbytery, and closing their own churches, they would go out for days and even weeks to help congregations more needy than their own.

The work progressed in such fashion that in the year 1814, there were three Presbyteries in the general region, Lancaster, Washington and Miami, and these were constituted as the Synod of Ohio.

In the year 1829 the Synod of Cincinnati was erected, composed of the Presbyteries of Chillicothe, Miami, Cincinnati, and Oxford; and for about ten years this was the alignment of Presbyterianism in the Miami Valley.

Then in 1837 came the division into New and Old School, which called for new boundaries. *Here comes in the first Presbytery of Dayton as part of the New School body.*

In the year 1870 came the reunion of Presbyterianism and the second Presbytery of Dayton, substantially as we know it to-day came about, embracing the churches of Darke, Clark, Montgomery, Butler, Miami, Green and Preble Counties.

And now comes up the question of the age of our body. It might be argued that because we were an integral part of the Presbytery of Washington, at its organization, in 1799, that we are now in our one hundred and twenty-seventh year.

This view would seem to be strengthened by the fact that three or four of our churches are exactly of this age; but we must admit that, even yet, such a conclusion is open to question.

How then would it do to leave the matter thus? Presbyterianism in the Miami Valley, of which we are a part covers a period of one hundred and thirty-six years, dating from the organization of the church in Cincinnati, 1790.

Not taking into account what we might have been, and ought to have been, there is much for which we are to be thankful to God. At this point I insert the words of Joseph G. Monfort in an address which he made at an anniversary of the Presbytery of Cincinnati, speaking from personal recollections. "I can see our Ministers in the pulpit and recall their peculiarities of voice and gesture. I can see them on horseback with overalls of velvet faced with buckskin, with their saddle bags under them, and their great coats wrapped about their umbrellas and tied behind them. I can see them at their meetings of Presbytery, with their wives and children, often, and in churches crowded with men, women and children, spending days of hospitality and fellowship and worship. Dear old men! Our ecclesiastical fathers and grandfathers. This generation cannot realize how much we owe to their zeal and prudence and industry and self-denial, in planting and watering the church which is our heritage." They carried the story of the Nazarene into the homes of the pioneers.

Within our territory, too, have been fostered educational institutions, leavened with gospel truth and animated by its spirit, whose fame and influence have gone throughout the world; the Miami University and the Western College for Women. Neither of them indeed is Presbyterian in charter, yet from the beginning until now, when two of our distinguished laymen are in their presidencies, their spirit and method have in good part emanated from the Presbyterianism of the region in which we dwell.

Conspicuous on our roll of Ministers, according to the judgement of men, have been the names Robert H. Bishop, George Junkin, William C. Anderson, Edward D. McMaster, John W. Hall, John S. Galloway, Phineas D. Gurley, Nathaniel C. Burt, James W. Brooks, Thomas E. Thomas, James S. Kemper., William W. Colmery and James R. Hughes.

Among the ruling elders, still confining ourselves to the somewhat distant past, were the Kings of Dayton and Springfield, the Christies and Rogerses, Peter Odlin, David Osborn, Robert W. Steel, Cyrus Falconer and, as adds Dr. Kemper who prepared this list, "an indefinite number more."

Neither is it right to pass by others, just as useful though less known, *our unnamed heroes.* Did you ever hear of Mary Kelly Edwards of our church at Troy? Perhaps not, but the angels have. Left a childless widow by the death of her husband, Superintendent of the Public Schools, in 1867, she was confronted with the question as to how she could use the rest of her life for the Master. The answer took her to Phoenix, Natal, South Africa, as a Missionary. After a toilsome voyage of 79 days she landed on a craft of three hundred and seventy-five tons, twelve seamen and nine passengers, and took up her work. Now at the age of ninety-six, blind, unable to leave her room, with a memory wonderfully stored with Bible truth, and with a more wonderful Christian experience, she is still at work with the native girls and women who seek her counsel and fondly call her, "Mother". Thus in that benighted and heathen country she awaits the personal return of her absent Lord, an event which she thinks is not far distant. And, so it is, that the spirit of the Lord is in the hearts of those who love Him truly, in whatever age, or clime, they may dwell. A bronze statue recently unveiled at Salem, Oregon, depicts a circuit rider on his mount, in his work in the North-West. But is such memorial really needed? Their record is on High. "These all having obtained a good report through faith received not the promises; God having provided some better things for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

Such in brief is the story of our past as a Presbytery, and we do well to honor the memory of those who have gone before.

They are a goodly part of that "cloud of witnesses" of which the writer to the Hebrews tells us, heroic men and women, who bring to us the heritage of inspiring example and devout observation. They had a work to do and did it. But, "The mill will never grind with the water that has passed." Robert E. Speer in his Tyndale-Day address, stressed the thought, that it is our duty to make the past a success. What will posterity think of us after one hundred and thirty-six years have passed?

Is Presbyterianism in this highly favored region having such visitations of the Holy Spirit as are promised in the Bible, or has the deadening influence of material prosperity crept over us? Dyer Burgess of Piqua used to say that the Miami Valley was too rich to produce good Christians. People said he was eccentric. Yes, but how about Him who said, 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of God!" And yet Christ came into the world to teach us who God is and what He can do. It was His mission from Bethlehem and Calvary, and on to Glory.

It is only as we live as He lived, and pray as He prayed, and work as He worked, that our religion becomes a power. I would detract nothing from the spirit of congratulation which is the sentiment of the hour. "Other men labored and we are entered into their labors." Yes, but if our Zion is to do her part in the work of God, it will be because with renewed emphasis and trust and zeal, we shall say as we have never said before, "I believe in the Holy Ghost." Till then the vision tarries and humanity is lost. *"Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?"*

"Other foundation can no man lay."
—I Cor. 3:11.

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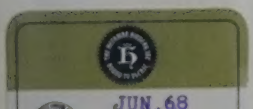
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